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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 GUATEMALA 000703

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [OAS](#) [PBTS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PNAT](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: PUTTING OUT FIRES: THE OAS OFFICE IN THE
BELIZE-GUATEMALA ADJACENCY ZONE.

Classified By: Political Officer George Mathews for reasons 1.4(b,d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. A recent trip by PolOff to the Organization of American States (OAS) office in the Belize-Guatemala Adjacency Zone (AZ) found an effective team performing difficult tasks under often arduous conditions. By resolving territorial disputes early in the process and at a local level, the office is doing its part to give Belmopan and Guatemala City the time needed to resolve the larger border issue. However, the OAS personnel are concerned that other problems, especially in Guatemala, have reduced the border issue to the back burner and question whether there's the interest or political will in Guatemala to move forward towards a permanent solution. END SUMMARY

The Zone

2. (U) The Adjacency Zone office was established in July 2003 within the mandate of the Agreement on the Confidence Building Measures (CBM), which was signed by Belize, Guatemala and the OAS. Under this agreement, the primary focus of the AZ office is to perform on-site verification along the Adjacency Line (AL) that separates Guatemala from Belize. The AL is a line that runs from Aguas Turbias in the north, through Garbutt's Falls to Gracias a Dios in the south. The AZ is the territory located less than one kilometer in either direction, east or west, from the AL. The territory to the west of the AL is administered by Guatemala, and to the east by Belize.

The History

3. (U) The dispute between Guatemala and Belize over Guatemala's claim to 12,700 square kilometers of land in Belize dates back to an 1859 treaty between Guatemala and the United Kingdom. According to the British, this treaty established the western boundary of its colony of Belize, formerly called British Honduras. Guatemala's position is that the treaty required Guatemala to relinquish its territorial claims only under certain conditions, which were not met. One of the most important of these conditions was an agreement that the UK would build a road from Guatemala to the Caribbean coast. This road was never constructed and Guatemala threatened to repudiate the treaty in 1884, but never followed through. The issue lay dormant for many years until the 1930s when it was revived by Guatemalan President Jorge Ubico. Ubico's position was that the treaty was invalid because the road was never constructed.

14. (U) Negotiations over the dispute continued between Guatemala and the UK through the latter half of the 20th century, but without success. At one point, in 1972, tensions rose between the two countries to such a degree that the UK dispatched an aircraft carrier and 8,000 troops to Belize while Guatemala massed troops on its side of the international boundary. This incident was resolved peacefully, but the larger issue remained unsettled, even after Belize achieved independence from the UK in 1981. Guatemala recognized Belize's independence in 1982, but never agreed on the exact border.

15. (U) In June 2000, the OAS General Assembly held in Windsor, Canada established the OAS Fund for Peace: Peaceful Settlement of Territorial Disputes; that same year, Guatemala and Belize began a new round of discussions under the auspices of the OAS and its new Peace Fund. Since then, the OAS Peace Fund has served to provide a hemispheric political mandate, and a pool of immediately available funds, to enable the OAS to react swiftly to an unforeseen crisis resulting from a territorial dispute between two or more Member States. In this context, the OAS, attempts to resolve the territorial dispute between Belize and Guatemala has demonstrated that the OAS can indeed be an effective agent in carrying out such projects. The United States has supported Peace Fund projects in Belize and Guatemala through voluntary financial contributions from USOAS and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, in tandem with contributions from other voluntary donors including Mexico, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

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16. (U) In March 2000, Guatemala and Belize began a new round of discussions under the auspices of the OAS General Secretariat. In February 2003, the two sides reached an agreement to continue under a new framework, called "The Transition Process." Under this framework, Guatemala and Belize agreed to work together in good faith to manage their relationship until a permanent resolution could be reached. A key part of this agreement was the establishment, in July 2003, of the Office of the General Secretariat of the Adjacency Zone. In September 2005, a second "Agreement on a Framework for Negotiations and Confidence Building Measures between Belize and Guatemala," was signed, which broadened the mission's mandate and scope of activities.

17. (U) In December 2008, the Foreign Ministers of both countries signed a third agreement at OAS headquarters in Washington. Through this accord, the two sides agreed to submit Guatemala's territorial, insular and maritime claim to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, according to the agreement and the Constitution of Guatemala, before the issue can be submitted to the ICJ, referenda will have to be held in both countries on the same day. In these simultaneous referenda, voters in Belize and Guatemala will both have to approve identically-worded resolutions that call for the dispute be resolved by the ICJ. Both sides have agreed to abide by the ICJ's decision. The accord did not specify a timeline for the referenda.

The Office

18. (U) Under the 2003 and 2005 agreements, the OAS office's primary responsibility is to perform on site verification, assist with voluntary resettlements for groups of people who live within the AZ, facilitate communications, and provide Global Positioning System (GPS) training to security forces from both countries.

19. (U) The OAS office consists of a Argentinean director, verification officers from Paraguay and Honduras, a Belizean administrative assistant, and an IT professional and driver/

mechanic, both from Guatemala. In addition, there are three educators currently contracted by the mission. The educators teach classes to children and adults in art, music and theater. The office has four 4x4 pickup trucks, however, only three are currently operable. On verification missions, officers use two-year-old GPS units and do not have satellite phones. In 2008, the office's activities were financed by USD 387,260 from the OAS's Fund for Peace.

¶10. (C) One of the office's primary tasks is to investigate and attempt to resolve incidents that occur within the AZ. As the land on the Belizean side of the AZ is very sparsely populated, and the standard of living is higher in Belize, office members say the overwhelming majority of the incidents they respond to involves Guatemalans crossing illegally into Belize. Adding to the problem is the fact that the land on the Guatemalan side of the AZ is exhausted, whereas the jungle and forest on the Belizean side is still relatively fertile. There are large parts of western Belize that are protected nature reserves. The OAS personnel say large numbers of the incidents they respond to involve Guatemalans who have crossed into Belize to graze animals, plant crops or who have crossed into Belize to graze animals, plant crops or engage in logging. Under Belizean law, illegal entry into the country normally results in a six-month prison sentence before deportation. The OAS personnel say that since the Belizean Defense Force (BDF) is now comfortable with the OAS office, it is very common that Guatemalans detained by the BDF will be turned over to the office for repatriation back to Guatemala. However, Guatemalans found in violation of additional Belizean laws, such as weapons possession, will be tried in the Belizean judicial system. Office personnel say this policy has at times resulted in harsh sentences for Guatemalans hunting for small game along the border. These hunters often come from indigenous communities and are hunting in tribal lands that have been used for this purpose for hundreds of years. However these tribal lands are now on two sides of a disputed international border.

¶11. (U) The differences between the two countries can readily be seen in the small town of El Arenal, which straddles the AL. El Arenal is set in a valley along the Mopan River. On the Belizean side of the town is a new school where over 200

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students attend class. Less than a kilometer away, in Guatemala, was a run-down, dilapidated school, with no students present in the middle of the school day. OAS personnel say that all the children in El Arenal go to the Belizean school and that electrical power was only recently added to the Guatemalan side of the town. The electricity is supplied by Belize. From El Arenal looking east into Belize, the hills are all heavily forested. Looking west into Guatemala, the deforestation is evident, and large amounts of what appears to be pasture land stretch toward the horizon. The one improved road into the town comes from Belize, and on the Guatemalan side there is only a rough, dirt road which crosses the Mopan.

¶12. (U) Typical of the type of work the office is called on to perform was a recent incident near the Guatemalan town of Santa Cruz. In November 2008, the mission was contacted by the BDF about shipping containers with construction materials that the BDF claimed were located on the Belizean side of the AL near Santa Cruz. As is common with many of the verifications, the OAS personnel first had to make arrangements with the Guatemalan military for a security escort while traveling to Santa Cruz. The personnel then had to traverse extremely rough terrain to reach the town. When they arrived and took GPS measurements, the mission personnel determined that the shipping containers were 90 meters inside Belize. Negotiations then ensued with the Guatemalan owner of the containers, who maintained that they were located on his land in Guatemala. These negotiations took place over several months. Finally, in February of 2009, after coordination with both the BDF and the Guatemalan military, a

force of 150 troops from the BDF and 100 troops from the Guatemalan military was assembled and the containers were towed back into Guatemala. The OAS personnel said the troops were necessary because tensions were running very high among local residents. This incident is illustrative of two aspects of the office's work. First, is the need for very precise GPS equipment, as the containers in question were less than 100 meters from the AL. Second, the role the OAS office plays in coordinating between the Guatemalan military and the BDF. In this and several other incidents, office personnel were able to get the two countries' security forces to work together toward a common goal.

¶13. (U) The OAS office also performs voluntary resettlements, as was the case with the village of Santa Rosa. In the late 1980s, a group of Guatemalan families established the village of Santa Rosa just east of the AL in Belize. By the early part of this decade, the village had grown to about 23 families. As an element of the 2005 agreement between Belize and Guatemala, the villagers were given the option of staying in Belize or being moved the short distance across the AZ back into Guatemala. The villagers chose to return to Guatemala. A three-phase resettlement project was then begun. In stages, the villagers were moved from their thatch-roofed huts on the Belizean side to newly-constructed homes on the Guatemalan side. A school and a drainage and sewer system were also constructed in the new village of Santa Rosa. The first phase of the resettlement began in QSanta Rosa. The first phase of the resettlement began in August of 2006, and the project was complete by April 2008.

¶14. (C) Another important role for the OAS office is facilitating coordination between the Guatemalan and Belizean security forces. Every three months a meeting is held at the OAS facility, which is located just across the AL from Melchor de Mencos, Guatemala. In general, OAS personnel report excellent relations with both the BDF and the Guatemalan Army. According to the OAS officers, because the BDF is so small, less than 1,000 troops total, it is easy to maintain good working relations with BDF commanders. Office members report no specific problems in their relations with the Guatemalan military, however because the Guatemalans tend to rotate troops out of the Peten frequently, there is a constant re-education process for incoming Guatemalan commanders and troops. The OAS personnel also provide GPS training to both security forces. Office members say the BDF troops require little additional training, but that it's necessary to constantly provide training to new Guatemalan soldiers.

Necessary Resources

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¶15. (SBU) There is an unanimity of opinion among the OAS personnel on the resources needed to continue to successfully conduct operations. First and foremost, because of budgeting issues, most OAS personnel operate on very short employment contracts, from a one- to three-month time period. This arrangement leads to a lack of financial security and is very damaging to morale. All OAS personnel spoken with said they loved the work, but found the lack of financial security very troubling. One verification officer said the situation has led some mission personnel to consider lower-paying, but more secure jobs. The officer added, "And it's not that easy to find an IT professional in Melchor de Mencos, Guatemala."

¶16. (U) In terms of equipment, the OAS personnel said their requirements include a satellite phone, a new 4x4 pick-up truck and 30 new GPS units. The OAS office currently has no satellite phones, and verification officers often travel to very isolated areas on horseback or on foot. Recently, one officer broke his arm in a fall from a horse while on a verification mission, and had no means to request medical

assistance. Office personnel estimate a satellite phone would cost approximately USD 3,000 and another USD 700-800 per year for the service plan. Likewise, the difficult terrain is very damaging to the office's vehicles. Of their four 4x4 pick ups, one is completely inoperable, and another is often down for maintenance. The OAS personnel say they need at least one more vehicle to carry out their operations.

Finally, given one of the main tasks of the office is to take very precise geographical measurements, personnel say they need 30 new Garmin Colorado GPS units. They would provide the BDF and the Guatemalan military each with 12 of the new units, along with training. The mission would keep six of the new GPSs.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: It is clear that the OAS' AZ office is performing a valuable service at a very low price. For a total cost to donor nations of approximately USD 400,000 per year, there is an element on the ground that is able to diffuse tensions and keep small disputes from growing into international incidents. It's also clear that the OAS personnel have been able to gain the trust of both governments and the local population. The question is whether progress is being made moving the broader issue forward. According to the December 2008 agreement, both sides need to conduct referenda on the same day in order to refer the matter to the ICJ. The director of the OAS' office believes Belize is ready to conduct their referendum almost immediately. However, he sees little political will in Guatemala to move the matter forward, primarily because Guatemala has so many other pressing issues. In his opinion, the border dispute is simply not on the political radar in Guatemala City.

¶18. (C) EMBASSY BELIZE COMMENT: Embassy Belize concurs with the comments of the Poloff and reiterates the importance of the OAS adjacency zone mission in keeping the situation on the ground calm while a permanent solution is sought.
McFarland